

Back to School – Health Information for Parents

With children getting back to school, it's a good time for parents to familiarise themselves with some of the common diseases that could cause illness, including serious illness, and disrupt children's studies.

Teach good hygiene habits

Good hygiene stops infections from spreading, which means less disrupted learning time.

Teach your child to wash hands properly for 20 seconds, use tissues for coughs and sneezes, and stay away from others when sick. Letting in fresh air can also reduce the spread of airborne viruses. The [e-bug resources](#) for all ages can help you to explain and discuss hygiene habits – and why they are important - to your child or teenager.

Know how to spot the signs

There are various types of illnesses to watch out for at this time of year; here are a few common ones:

Scarlet fever cases usually peak in the late winter and early spring. The most common symptoms of [scarlet fever](#) include sore throat, fever, swollen neck glands, a bumpy rash on the chest and tummy with a sandpaper-like feel, flushed cheeks and “strawberry tongue”. If you suspect your child has scarlet fever, contact your local GP. Getting antibiotics quickly greatly reduces the risk of scarlet fever causing a more serious infection. Keep children away from nursery or school for 24 hours after starting antibiotics.

Since autumn 2023 there have been a number of major measles outbreaks in England. Measles can be a very serious disease for some children and tragically, it can even cause fatalities. The initial symptoms of [measles](#) are similar to those for a cold (runny nose; a cough; sneezing; a high temperature; and red, sore, watery eyes) this is followed by white spots in the mouth a few days later, and by a rash on the face and body a few days after that. It's very unlikely to be measles if your child has had both doses of the MMR vaccine or they've had measles before. If you think your child has measles call NHS 111 or your GP (call ahead to avoid risking infecting others in waiting rooms).

[Chickenpox](#) can also spread in schools at any time of year and are highly contagious. An itchy, spotty rash is the main symptom of chickenpox. It can be anywhere on the body. It's important for anyone with chickenpox not to go near new-born babies or anyone who's pregnant or has a weakened immune system, as chickenpox can be dangerous for them.

If your child has [diarrhoea and/or vomiting](#) it's usually a viral illness such as norovirus caused by person-to-person spread. Keep them at home until they have been free of symptoms for 48 hours.

Ensure your child is up to date with vaccinations

Vaccines provide the best protection against many common but potentially serious illnesses. Over the past decade, fewer children are getting routine vaccines, putting them at risk of serious disease. This also leaves schools vulnerable to outbreaks and increases pressure on the NHS.

If your child is up to date with their NHS vaccination schedule, they will already be protected against diseases like whooping cough, measles, mumps and rubella throughout their school career, as most provide lifelong immunity.

Unvaccinated children are at higher risk of contracting these illnesses and having more severe symptoms than vaccinated classmates. They can also spread diseases to others. Check your child's red book or contact your GP surgery to ensure they are up to date on all vaccines.

School-age children and young people are offered the following vaccinations:

Flu: A different flu vaccine is needed every year and is given as a quick and painless nasal spray. Flu vaccination is being offered to all school-age children up to year 11 and for children aged 2 and 3. When you get the electronic or paper consent form, please make sure you return it, so your child doesn't miss their nasal spray vaccination session.

HPV: At age 12 to 13, the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine is offered to protect against viruses that can cause genital warts or cancer.

MenACWY: 13- to 15-year-olds are offered this vaccine against meningococcal meningitis and septicaemia. This is usually given in year 9 or 10 along with the 3-in-1 teenage booster.

Know when to keep your child at home

It's fine to send your child to school or nursery with a minor [cough](#) or [common cold](#) if they are otherwise well and do not have a high temperature. But if your child has a fever, they should stay home from school or nursery until they feel better, and the fever has resolved.

If they have [diarrhoea and/or vomiting](#), they should stay home for at least 48 hours after the last episode.

It is no longer recommended that children and young people are routinely tested for COVID-19 unless directed to by a health professional. But if your child has tested positive for COVID-19, they should try to stay at home and avoid contact with other people for 3 days after the day they took the test. Children and young people who usually go to school, college or childcare and who live with someone who has a positive COVID-19 test result should continue to attend as normal.

The NHS has a [useful guide](#) to help parents decide whether a child is well enough to go to school, based on their symptoms.

Through these preventative measures, and by recognising illnesses promptly, you can help your child stay healthy and keep school absences to a minimum this term.

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